

General walked fine line with flair

Editor's note: This is part of a yearlong series of profiles of Utahns — noted and notorious — whose lives are part of the state's fabric. The series will continue on Tuesdays through the centennial year.

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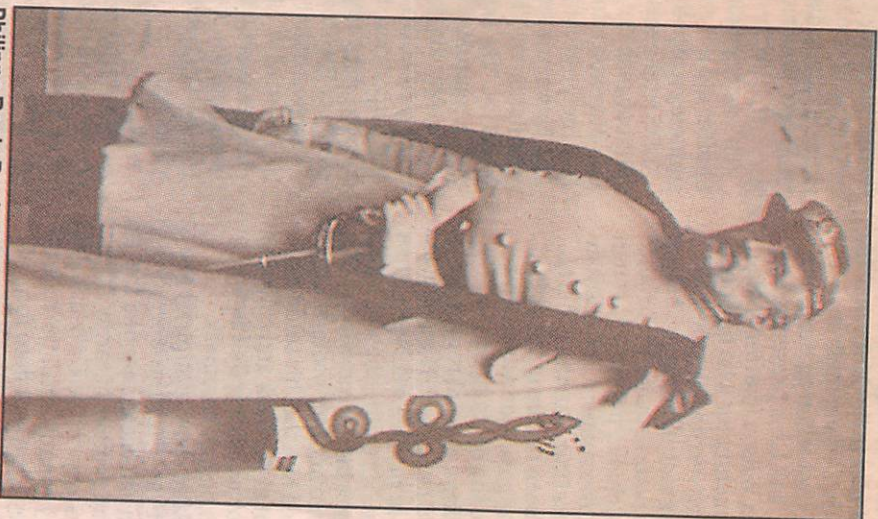


UTAH PROFILES

During the 1870s, a difficult decade for Latter-day Saint settlers of Utah, President Brigham Young expected to be arrested at any time, as many of his associates already had been, for the practice of polygamy. He actually welcomed the prospect as an opportunity to declare the rights of the LDS to worship as they chose and to publicize the persecution they were suffering at the hands of the U.S. government. But church leaders also feared for President Young's life. They had already seen one prophet slain and were determined not to lose another at the hands of detractors.

In this tense time, President Young turned for help to a man who was neither Mormon nor a native of the territory — General Philippe Regis Denis Keredern de Trobriand. Head of the U.S. military troops

Please see **GENERAL** on B2



Philippe Regis Denis Keredern de Trobriand

GENERAL

Continued from B1

stationed at Fort Douglas, de Trobriand was a fair, forthright and sensible man who thought the military should not dabble in politics. In this instance, he sent a return message to President Young that he would protect the church leader from harm if he were arrested.

De Trobriand's tenure in Utah was short, but he played an effective role in preventing outright hostilities between the soldiers he commanded and the Mormon population they had been assigned to keep an eye on. In trying to maintain a balance between the non-Mormons who had been sent to govern Utah Territory and its initial settlers, he stepped on sensitive toes and ultimately lost his position here.

Born June 4, 1816, in Tours, France, he was the son of a baron-general and nephew of another general. On a visit to the United States, he married the daughter of a prestigious New York family and chose to become a U.S. citizen at about the time the Civil War erupted. He was given the rank of colonel in the 55th New York Volunteer Regiment in August 1861 and quickly rose through several additional ranks to become a major general with command of a division in the Army of the Potomac. He was the first Frenchman to achieve such rank since Marquis de Lafayette, a Revolutionary War hero.

By late 1869, de Trobriand had been named commander of Ameri-

ca's western district with headquarters in Montana. He gained a reputation as a good military leader, but one who disliked political intrigue and disdained military officers who used their office to promote political purposes. He also disagreed with the military's constabulary role, such as that imposed on Utah Territory.

In the spring of 1870, he was sent to head the 13th Infantry at Fort Douglas, a post described by the Army's commander-in-chief as "an American consulate in a foreign city." The camp had been established in October 1862 to protect the overland mail route and keep perceived Mormon rebels in check.

With four companies, he undertook the grueling trek from Fort Shaw, Mont., to the Utah base, covering the 556 miles to Corinne in about 40 days, then traveling by rail to Salt Lake.

One of de Trobriand's first clashes with the non-Mormon political leaders in Utah came in September 1870. Two of his regiment's companies had been sent to Camp Rawlins near Provo. Initially, the soldiers and local residents had little to do with one another, but on Sept. 22, that changed.

Some of the soldiers contracted with a local man to use his home for a dinner party. However, they partied before the party, got drunk and began wandering the streets of Provo, claiming the Mormons had failed to carry through on their promise.

William Miller, an LDS bishop

and city alderman, was marched down a main street at bayonet point. He was released when he was able to convince the drunken soldiers he had not been the one who promised them accommodations. For two hours, mayhem reigned, with gunshots fired, citizens hassled and several buildings damaged.

The "Provo outrage" was a cogent reminder to the Mormons that the Nauvoo Legion, their own source of protection against such outrages, had been proscribed by Gov. John Wilson Shaffer, a blatant Mormon-hater who had been installed as territorial governor.

Shaffer took advantage of the incident to pounce on de Trobriand, whom he chided publicly, through the local newspapers, for mismanaging the affair. But the general had not been remiss in his duty. While the governor was writing letters to the newspapers, he was conducting a careful review of what had happened. His reply, also printed in the Deseret News, gave tit for tat. He subtly showed up the governor's lack of knowledge of peacetime military protocols and reminded him that his soldiers were not at the beck and call of any governor unless applied for through proper channels.

In a false show of support and "high regard" for the Mormons, Shaffer had recommended that de Trobriand remove his army from the territory "if the United States soldiery cannot fulfill the high object they were sent here for." De Trobriand's response was: "By all means, sire, if you wish it. . .

we of the Army are not of a meddling temper, we are no politicians, we don't belong to any ring, we have no interest in any clique and we don't share in any spoils. Our personal ambition is generally limited to the honest and patriotic performance of our duties. . . . If the presence of U.S. soldiery interferes in any way with the harmonious workings of your 'happy family' we will let you alone to the full enjoyment of that popularity which so justly distinguishes your administration and surrounds your person in this Territory of Utah."

The sarcasm didn't go unnoticed. Shaffer did not respond. He died suddenly a month later.

LDS leaders used the obvious split between the general and the non-Mormon administration to fuel their own objectives. The Deseret News printed a letter congratulating de Trobriand for his integrity. "So long as gentlemen are in command there is no reason . . . to fear anything else." A thorough gentleman by birth, breeding and disposition, the general was pleased. He completed his investigation of the Provo debacle and determined that soldiers too long deprived of whiskey and female companionship and having not been paid for two months had caused the mischief. Several were punished.

During late 1870 and early 1871, de Trobriand visited France. When he returned he found that Brevet Maj. Gen. Henry A. Morrow, whom he had placed in temporary command, had entrenched himself with Utah's non-Mormon element

and was ready to challenge the Frenchman for the Fort Douglas position. Morrow was sent back to Fort Steele in Wyoming, but the ground had been laid for de Trobriand's continuing problems with his superior officers.

His next challenge came with an edict by Territorial Secretary George Black that the Nauvoo Legion would not be permitted to march in the July 4, 1871, celebration parade. The secretary demanded that de Trobriand back up the edict. The matter went clear to the U.S. Secretary of War, who commanded de Trobriand not to let the Legion participate in the parade even if it took force to prevent it.

So on the evening before the holiday, he positioned men along the route, each with 40 rounds of ammunition. They had instructions only to "present arms" if challenged by Mormon rebels. Any command to "fire" would have to come from the governor himself, the general determined, putting the onus on his shoulders. Meanwhile, de Trobriand himself was a "self-invited" guest of Brigham Young for lunch.

When it was time for the July 4 procession to begin, the Mormon leader had a little surprise of his own. The Nauvoo Legion was nowhere in sight. Instead, a procession of young girls with crowns of flowers paraded, creating a marked contrast with the armed soldiers. De Trobriand noted the event in his memoirs, congratulating the church leader on his cleverness.

Such fraternizing with the "enemy" gained de Trobriand further enemies of his own.

In October, the tense situation escalated. Non-Mormon Utah Chief Justice James McKean, who saw the forced demise of Mormonism as "the mission that God has called me to perform in Utah," charged President Young with lewd and lascivious cohabitation and adultery. The expectation that the Saints would react with an armed rebellion upon his arrest led to a call for additional U.S. troops, especially since the Legion's 6,000 members far outnumbered several hundred federal troops.

President Young had assured de Trobriand that there would be no such uprising. The general nevertheless asked for more men, but with less enthusiasm than his fellow non-Mormons would have liked. President Young was arrested Oct. 2, 1871, and put under house arrest. On Oct. 15, de Trobriand received a telegram from President Grant ordering him to Fort Steele, to be replaced at Fort Douglas by Morrow.

De Trobriand went, complaining that his only fault was to be "too much of a gentleman and soldier and not enough of a politician."

In the mid-1870s, he was sent to Louisiana for duty related to the post-Civil War reconstruction of the South. He died July 15, 1897, in Bayport, Long Island, N.Y., only a year after Utah was admitted to the Union as a state.

De Trobriand's story is recounted in the summer 1996 edition of the Utah Historical Quarterly, Volume 64.

1870-1871